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Tschalaer, M and Held, N

Title	LGBTQI+ asylum claimants face extreme social isolation in Germany
Authors	Tschalaer, M and Held, N
Type	Article
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/62117/
Published Date	2019

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BEYOND TRAFFICKING AND SLAVERY

LGBTQI+ asylum claimants face extreme social isolation in Germany

LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum in Germany are isolated, inadequately housed, and at risk of violence.

[Mengia Tschalaer](#)

[Nina Held](#)

26 November 2019, 8.00am

The German Lesbian and Gay Association (Lesben und Schwulen Verband Deutschland) estimates that out of the nearly 1.6 million refugees that have been registered in Germany between 2015 and 2018, approximately 60,000 are LGBTQI+ individuals from countries in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean. Like many other people who are currently waiting for their asylum interview or asylum decision, they are predominantly housed in rural areas in Germany in former hotels, community centres, and even barracks. “They sent me to the mountain”, one transgender claimant from Iraq said.

This presents many problems for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers as Germany uses a mechanism called the “Königssteiner Schlüssel” to proportionally distribute asylum

seekers across the country's sixteen federal states. This means that LGBTQI+ claimants often end up in very remote areas. Furthermore, since people who seek asylum on the grounds of their sexuality and/or gender identity are not separately registered, they are often housed together with the very people they fled from in the first place.

“You live in the closet because you don't know who is your neighbour.”

Safe LGBTQI+ accommodation is rare and only exists in urban areas such as Berlin and Frankfurt. The great majority of gay, lesbian, bi, intersex, trans, and non-binary individuals seeking asylum will never have the privilege to be housed in a safe space or to be within reach of community support. They know they are at risk of violence and fear coming out. As a result, LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum in Germany often face extreme isolation. “I don't talk to anyone. I keep to myself”, one young lesbian from Tanzania said. “I am afraid that if the others find out, everything will get worse.” Another young gay man from Uganda echoed his fears. “When we're in the reception centres we try to hide”, he said. “You live in the closet because you don't know who is your neighbour.”

The story of Hope, a lesbian from Uganda, further illustrates the precarious situation of LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum who are housed in rural areas. “I can't breathe”, Hope said. “I am scared. The woman I share my room [with] wants to harm me – she doesn't like me. Maybe she knows [that I am a lesbian] because I never talk about my husband or boyfriend like other women do. She makes my life here like hell.” Hope suffers from depression and severe anxiety, which she ascribes amongst other things to her poor housing situation. She has repeatedly asked for a transfer to the city, where she would have access to LGBTQI+ organisations and other queer refugees. Her requests have all been denied.

Since 2017 we have interviewed over 100 people, including NGO professionals, lawyers, judges, policy-makers and LGBTQI+ refugees and people seeking asylum. We found that most of the people interviewed had experienced social isolation and discrimination. They felt a heightened sense of loneliness and lacked access to adequate legal, medical, psychological and social support.

LGBTQI+ claimants said over and over again that they feel compelled to hide their sexual orientation within the accommodation centres, which can be extremely difficult when sharing a room with several other people. They also shared many experiences of sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia in the villages in which the accommodation centres are located. "If you are in a small village and everyone knows that you are gay or lesbian or intersex or trans, that is, that's really terrible, believe me", one claimant said. The social isolation by LGBTQI+ claimants is exacerbated by the fact

that they often avoid contact with non-LGBTQI+ claimants out of fear of their possible negative reaction. This increases the risk of mental health-related issues, which, in turn, can affect their asylum proceedings.

Hope's claim was rejected on the grounds that she was not open enough about her sexual orientation. But, she explained to us, "the reason is [they've] sent me in the village. The moment I reached here I could not express myself because of the environment I was in. ... So by the time I went for my interview I was still in fear, because of the place they had put me."

Our research findings stress how important it is for decision makers to understand the complexities of LGBTQI+ claimants' experiences and why it is often difficult for them to express themselves freely. We urge the German government to support the establishment of safe housing for LGBTQI+ claimants and accommodate them in urban areas where they can socialise with other LGBTQI+ people, access support, and integrate in society. As such, we also support the campaign by the organisation Rainbow Refugees Munich/SUB, which is currently lobbying the city of Munich to provide safe accommodations for LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum.

This article is based on a recent policy brief published by the University of Bristol. The policy brief is based on data generated from two EU-funded research projects on queer asylum in Germany *Queer Muslim Asylum in Germany*, (QMAG) (University of Bristol) and *SOGICA – Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Claims of Asylum* (University of Sussex), which used a variety of research methods to explore the legal and social experiences of LGBTQI+ asylum claimants and refugees in Germany. **Download the complete policy brief.**

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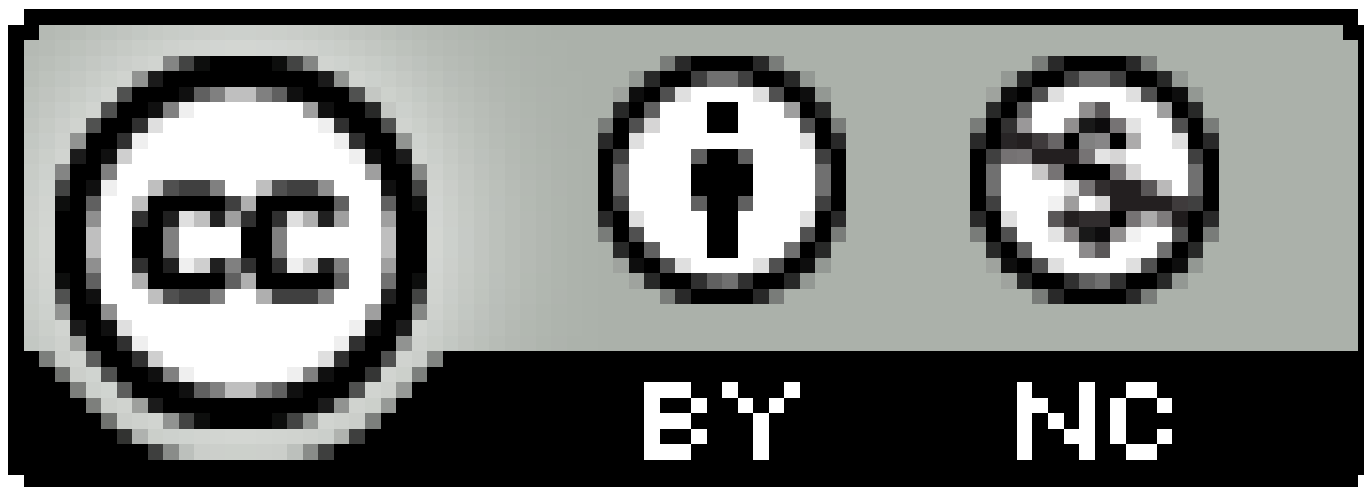
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